# Roaring Twenties

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The **Roaring Twenties** is a phrase used to describe the [1920s](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/1920s), principally in [North America](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/North_America) but also in [London](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/London), [Paris](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Paris) and [Berlin](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Berlin). The phrase was meant to emphasize the period's social, artistic, and cultural dynamism. '[Normalcy](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Normalcy)' returned to politics in the wake of [World War I](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/World_War_I), [jazz music](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Jazz_music) blossomed, the [flapper](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Flapper) redefined modern womanhood, [Art Deco](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Art_Deco) peaked, and finally the [Wall Street Crash of 1929](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Wall_Street_Crash_of_1929) served to punctuate the end of the era, as [The Great Depression](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/The_Great_Depression) set in. The era was further distinguished by several inventions and discoveries of far-reaching importance, unprecedented industrial growth, accelerated consumer demand and aspirations, and significant changes in lifestyle.

The social and cultural features known as the Roaring Twenties began in leading metropolitan centers, especially New York, Paris and Berlin, then spread widely in the [aftermath of World War I](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Aftermath_of_World_War_I). The United States gained dominance in world finance. Thus when Germany could no longer afford war reparations to Britain, France and other Allies, the Americans came up with the [Dawes Plan](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Dawes_Plan) and Wall Street invested heavily in Germany, which repaid its reparations to nations that in turn used the dollars to pay off their war debts to Washington. By the middle of the decade, prosperity was widespread. The second half of the decade becoming known as the "[Golden Twenties](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Golden_Twenties)". In France and francophone [Canada](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Canada), they were also called the "*années folles*" ("Crazy Years").[[1]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-0)

The spirit of the Roaring Twenties was marked by a general feeling of discontinuity associated with [modernity](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Modernity), a break with traditions. Everything seemed to be feasible through modern technology. New technologies, especially automobiles, moving pictures and [radio](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Radio) proliferated 'modernity' to a large part of the population. Formal decorative frills were shed in favor of practicality in both daily life and architecture. At the same time, jazz and dancing rose in popularity, in opposition to the mood of the specter of [World War I](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/World_War_I). As such, the period is also often referred to as the [Jazz Age](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Jazz_Age).

## Economy

The Roaring Twenties was an era of great economic growth and widespread prosperity driven by government growth policies, a boom in construction, and the rapid growth of consumer goods such as automobiles. The [North American economy](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Economy_of_North_America), particularly the [economy of the US](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Economy_of_the_United_States), which had successfully transitioned from [a wartime economy](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/War_economy) to a peacetime economy, boomed, although there were sectors that were stagnant, especially farming and mining. The United States augmented its standing as the [richest country](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_%28PPP%29_per_capita) in the world, its industry aligned to mass production and its society acculturated into [consumerism](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Consumerism). In Europe, the economy did not start to flourish until 1924.[[2]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-1)

The Roaring Twenties ended with the Stock Market Crash of late 1929 and the onset of the [Great Depression](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Great_Depression).

## Culture

### Suffrage

Main article: [Women's suffrage](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage)

On August 18, 1920, [Tennessee](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Tennessee) became the last of 36 states needed to ratify the [Nineteenth Amendment](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Nineteenth_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution), granting women the [right to vote](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage). Equality at the polls marked a pivotal moment in the [women's rights movement](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Women%27s_rights).

### Lost Generation

Main article: [Lost Generation](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Lost_Generation)

The Lost Generation were young people who came out of World War I disillusioned and cynical about the world. The term usually refers to American literary notables who lived in [Paris](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Paris) at the time. Famous members included [Ernest Hemingway](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Ernest_Hemingway), [F. Scott Fitzgerald](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/F._Scott_Fitzgerald), and [Gertrude Stein](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Gertrude_Stein). These authors, also referred to as [expatriates](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Expatriates), wrote novels and short stories expressing their resentment towards the materialism and individualism that permeated during this era.

### Social criticism

Main article: [Social issues of the 1920s](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Social_issues_of_the_1920s)

As the average American in the 1920s became more enamored of wealth and everyday luxuries, some began satirizing the hypocrisy and greed they observed. Of these social critics, [Sinclair Lewis](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Sinclair_Lewis) was the most popular. His popular 1920 novel [*Main Street*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Main_Street_%28novel%29) satirized the dull and ignorant lives of the residents of a Midwestern town. He followed with [*Babbitt*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Babbitt_%28novel%29), about a [middle-aged](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Middle_age) businessman who rebels against his safe life and family, only to realize that the young generation is as hypocritical as his own. Lewis satirized religion with [*Elmer Gantry*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Elmer_Gantry), which followed a [con man](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Confidence_trick) who teams up with an evangelist to sell religion to a small town.

Other social critics included [Sherwood Anderson](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Sherwood_Anderson), [Edith Wharton](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Edith_Wharton) and [H.L. Mencken](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/H.L._Mencken). Anderson published a collection of short stories titled [*Winesburg, Ohio*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Winesburg,_Ohio_%28novel%29), which studied the dynamics of a small town. Wharton mocked the fads of the new era through her novels, such as [*Twilight Sleep*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/w/index.php?title=Twilight_Sleep_%28novel%29&action=edit&redlink=1) (1927). Mencken criticized narrow American tastes and culture in various essays and articles.

### Art Deco

[](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/File:Chrysler_Building_at_night.JPG)

[https://secure.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/File:Chrysler_Building_at_night.JPG)

Climax of the new architectural style: the [Chrysler Building](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Chrysler_Building) in [New York City](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/New_York_City) was built after the European wave of [Art Deco](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Art_Deco) reached the United States.

[Art Deco](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Art_Deco) was the style of design and architecture that marked the era. Originating in Belgium, it spread to the rest of western Europe and North America towards the mid-1920s.

In the U.S., one of the most remarkable buildings featuring this style was constructed as the [tallest building](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/List_of_tallest_buildings_and_structures_in_the_world) of the time: the [Chrysler Building](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Chrysler_Building). The forms of art deco were pure and geometric, even though the artists often drew inspiration from nature. In the beginning, lines were curved, though rectilinear designs would later become more and more popular.

### Expressionism and Surrealism

Further information: [Weimar culture](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Weimar_culture)

[Painting](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Painting) in North America during the 1920s developed in a different direction than that of Europe. In Europe, the 1920s were the era of [expressionism](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Expressionism), and later [surrealism](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Surrealism). As [Man Ray](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Man_Ray) stated in 1920 after the publication of a unique issue of *New York Dada*: "[Dada](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Dada) cannot live in New York".

### Jazz Age

Main article: [Jazz Age](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Jazz_Age)

The first commercial [radio station](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Radio_station) in the United States, [KDKA](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/KDKA_%28AM%29), began broadcasting in [Pittsburgh](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Pittsburgh,_Pennsylvania) in 1922. Radio stations subsequently proliferated at a remarkable rate, and with them spread the popularity of jazz. Jazz became associated with all things modern, sophisticated, and also decadent. Men tended to sing in a high pitched voice, typified by [Harold Scrappy Lambert](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/w/index.php?title=Harold_Scrappy_Lambert&action=edit&redlink=1), one of the popular recording artists of the decade.

The jazz of the 1920s was typified by such musical artists as [Paul Whiteman](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Paul_Whiteman), [Ted Lewis](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Ted_Lewis), [Nat Shilkret](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Nat_Shilkret) and [Bob Haring](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Bob_Haring). Both Paul Whiteman and Ted Lewis vied with each other for the title of *King of Jazz* during the 1920s. The improvised music that people consider today as "jazz" tended to be played by minorities. In the 1920s, the majority of people listened to what we would call today "sweet music." This music was typified by a careful arrangement that followed the melody of the music, with little or no improvisation, and included violins and other string instruments.

What is known as hardcore jazz today was categorized as "hot music" or "[race music](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Race_music)" and was improvised and only rarely utilized string instruments. Although many of these *hot* musicians are well known today they were virtually unknown in the 1920s. Artists such as [Louis Armstrong](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Louis_Armstrong), [Sidney Bechet](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Sidney_Bechet) were virtually unknown until the mid 1930s. Those *hot* artists who did eventually become popular, such as [Duke Ellington](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Duke_Ellington) and [Ethel Waters](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Ethel_Waters), drastically changed their styles to cater to a mainstream audience.

### The changing role of women

With the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women finally attained the political equality that they had so long been fighting for. A generational gap began to form between the “new” women of the 20s and the previous generation. Prior to the 19th Amendment, feminists commonly thought that one could have either a career or one could have a husband and a family, for one would inherently inhibit the development of the other. This mentality began to change in the 20s as more women began to desire not only successful careers of their own but also families.[[11]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-10) The “new” woman was less invested in social service than the Progressive generations, and in tune with the capitalistic spirit of the era, she was eager to compete and to find personal fulfilment.[[12]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-11)

The 1920s saw significant change in the lives of working women. [World War I](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/World_War_I) had temporarily allowed women to enter into industries such as chemical, automobile, and iron and steel manufacturing, which were once deemed inappropriate work for women.[[13]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-12) Black women, who had been historically closed out of factory jobs, began to find a place in industry during World War I by accepting lower wages and replacing the lost immigrant labor and in heavy work. Yet, like other women during World War I, their success was only temporary; most black women were also pushed out of their factory jobs after the war. In 1920, seventy-five percent of the black female labor force consisted of agricultural laborers, domestic servants, and laundry workers.[[14]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-Kessler-Harris.2C_Alice_2003._p._237-13)

Legislation passed at the beginning of the 20th century forced many factories to shorten their workdays and pay a minimum wage. This shifted the focus in the 1920s to job performance in order to meet demand. Factories encouraged workers to produce more quickly and efficiently with speedups and bonus systems, increasing the pressure on factory workers.[[14]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-Kessler-Harris.2C_Alice_2003._p._237-13) Despite the strain on women in the factories, the booming economy of the 1920s meant more opportunities even for the lower classes. Many young girls from working-class backgrounds did not need to help support their families as prior generations did and were often encouraged to seek work or receive vocational training which would result in social mobility.[[15]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-14)

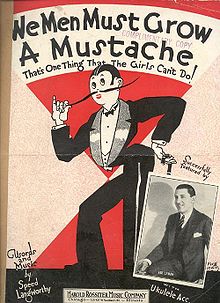
Achieving suffrage meant having to refocus feminism. Groups such as the National Women’s Party (NWP) continued the political fight, proposing the [Equal Rights Amendment](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Equal_Rights_Amendment) in 1923 and working to remove laws that used sex to discriminate against women.[[16]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-15) But many women shifted their focus from politics to challenge traditional definitions of womanhood.

Young women, especially, began staking claim to their own bodies and took part in a sexual liberation of their generation. Many of the ideas that fueled this change in sexual thought were already floating around New York intellectual circles prior to World War I, with the writings of [Sigmund Freud](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Sigmund_Freud), Havelock Ellis, and Ellen Key. There, thinkers outed that sex was not only central to the human experience but that women were sexual beings with human impulses and desires just like men and restraining these impulses was self-destructive. By the 1920s, these ideas had permeated the mainstream.[[17]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-16)

The 1920s saw the emergence of the co-ed, as women began attending large state colleges and universities. Women entered into the mainstream middle-class experience, but took on a gendered role within society. Women typically took classes such as home economics, “Husband and Wife”, “Motherhood” and “The Family as an Economic Unit”. In an increasingly conservative post-war era, it was common for a young woman to attend college with the intention of finding a suitable husband.[[18]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-17) Fueled by ideas of sexual liberation, dating underwent major changes on college campuses. With the advent of the automobile, courtship occurred in a much more private setting. “Petting”, sexual relations without intercourse, became the social norm for college students.[[19]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-18)

Despite women’s increased knowledge of pleasure and sex, the decade of unfettered capitalism that was the 20s gave birth to the ‘feminine mystique’. With this formulation, all women wanted to marry, all good women stayed at home with their children, cooking and cleaning, and the best women did the aforementioned and in addition, exercised their purchasing power freely and as frequently as possible in order to better their families and their homes.[[20]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-19) This left many housewives feeling frustrated and unsatisfied.

### Tolerance towards other groups

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Sheet music poking fun at the masculine traits many women adopted during the 1920s.

In [urban areas](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Urban_area), minorities were treated with more equality than they had been accustomed to previously.[*[citation needed](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Wikipedia:Citation_needed" \o "Wikipedia:Citation needed)*] This was reflected in some of the films of the decade. [*Redskin*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Redskin_%28film%29) (1929) and [*Son of the Gods*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Son_of_the_Gods) (1929), for instance, deal sympathetically with [Native Americans](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States) and [Asian Americans](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Asian_American) respectively, openly reviling social bias. On the stage and in movies, black and white players appeared together for the first time.[[21]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-20)

It became possible to go to [nightclubs](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Nightclub) and see whites and minorities dancing and eating together. Even popular songs poked fun at the new social acceptance of [homosexuality](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Homosexuality). One of these songs had the title "Masculine Women, Feminine Men."[[22]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-21) It was released in 1926 and recorded by numerous artists of the day and included the following lyrics:[[23]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties" \l "cite_note-22)

*Masculine women, Feminine men*

*Which is the rooster, which is the hen?*

*It's hard to tell 'em apart today! And, say!*

*Sister is busy learning to shave,*

*Brother just loves his permanent wave,*

*It's hard to tell 'em apart today! Hey, hey!*

*Girls were girls and boys were boys when I was a tot,*

*Now we don't know who is who, or even what's what!*

*Knickers and trousers, baggy and wide,*

*Nobody knows who's walking inside,*

*Those masculine women and feminine men!*[[24]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-23)

The relative [liberalism](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Liberalism) of the decade is demonstrated by the fact that the actor [William Haines](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/William_Haines), regularly named in newspapers and magazines as the #1 male box-office draw, openly lived in a gay relationship with his partner, [Jimmie Shields](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Jimmie_Shields).[[25]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-24) Other popular gay actors/actresses of the decade included [Alla Nazimova](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Alla_Nazimova) and [Ramon Novarro](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Ramon_Novarro).[[26]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-25)

In 1927, [Mae West](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Mae_West) wrote a play about homosexuality called, [*The Drag*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/w/index.php?title=The_Drag_%28play%29&action=edit&redlink=1),.[[27]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties" \l "cite_note-26)[[28]](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Roaring_Twenties#cite_note-27) and alluded to the work of [Karl Heinrich Ulrichs](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Karl_Heinrich_Ulrichs). It was a box-office success. West regarded talking about sex as a basic [human rights](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Human_rights) issue, and was also an early advocate of [gay rights](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/LGBT_social_movements). With the return of conservatism in the 1930s, the public grew intolerant of homosexuality, and [gay actors](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Gay_actors) were forced to choose between retiring or agreeing to hide their sexuality.[[*citation needed*](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Wikipedia:Citation_needed)]